

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Note to "Ethics and Access to Teaching Material in the Medical Library: The Case of the Pernkopf Atlas"

I have just finished reading Michel Atlas's article "Ethics and Access to Teaching Material in the Medical Library: The Case of the Pernkopf Atlas" [1]. I am familiar with the set, having purchased it about fifteen years ago at great expense in a hospital library where I was director. It is indeed a beautiful production and, only after purchasing it, did I begin to hear some of the things that Atlas has recounted so well in her scholarly article.

There is, however, a minor point I should like to clarify. On page 53, Atlas correctly identifies Yad Vashem as the Israel Holocaust and Martyrs Remembrance authority. However, in the next paragraph, she states: "The request for an investigation by Vashem may have been included . . .," thus inferring that Yad Vashem is a person, rather than an institution. Because this organization may be unfamiliar to some, I feel it is worth noting.

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The laboratory as library metaphor and some reflections on professional practice

In her column in the January 2001 issue of the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, Carolyn Lipscomb accurately pointed out how

the idea of the library as a laboratory emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, both as a symptom of the changes taking place in collections during the period and as an expression of the changing role of the library "in facilitating the use of information to develop new knowledge." No one promoted this "workshop" model for the library more than Justin Winsor (1831-1897), appointed Harvard's chief librarian in 1877 and the first president of the American Library Association. "Books may be accumulated and guarded, and the result is sometimes a library," he proclaimed, "but if books are made to help and spur men on in their daily work, the library becomes a vital influence; the prison is turned into a workshop" [1].

This revolutionary concept held special implications for professional practice. Melvil Dewey (1851-1931) pioneered reference service at Columbia and, in so doing, ushered in a tremendous advance for the provision of information resources, but, for all our veneration of Dewey, it should be remembered that he often referred to librarianship as that perfect "mechanical art" [2]. Dewey was interested in the technical proficiencies of collection organization and access, and his concept of reference service—indeed of librarianship in general—always left the impression of technical tinkering rather than substantive content development.

Not so with the likes of Winsor or, for that matter, Pierce Butler (1884-1953), who came much later and understood that librarians needed a rather high degree of knowledge and sophistication with regard to the content of the collections they managed. Anyone who wants a primer on this should read John V. Richardson's *The Gospel of Scholarship: Pierce Butler and a Critique of American Librarianship*. Dewey saw the librarian as the scholar's

helpmate; Winsor and Butler saw the librarian as the scholar's navigator and counselor and sometimes even as the scholar. The former aids the process; the latter is the process.

Winsor and Butler exemplified this beau ideal in their own professional practice. Winsor, for example, produced an exhaustive biography of Christopher Columbus [3] and helped fashion the American Library Association that would help lead librarianship beyond a mere ancillary activity toward a complex profession [4]. Butler not only wrote a textbook on librarianship now considered a classic [5], he also supervised the work of thirty-five doctoral and fourteen master's degree students during his twenty years at the University of Chicago [6]. One never encounters this level of scholarship in Dewey, and there is no indication that he thought it particularly necessary. Medical librarianship had its counterpart in John Shaw Billings (1838-1913), whose *Index Medicus* (1879) and subject-based *Index Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office* (1880) called upon both his expertise as a physician as well as his skill as a bibliographer [7]. His work reflected the scholarly role of the librarian as much as it expressed the library's emerging mission as the scholar's workshop.

These dual concepts of librarianship persist at least in part, because librarians always exhibit a bit of both in their daily activities. The roles of librarians as helpers or scholars each have their appropriate place, and today a good deal of scholarship rests upon the technical ability to access and organize the information requisite to the task. In some measure, the distinction of librarians as proactive scholars and librarians as technical assistants has blurred.

I worry sometimes about those administrators outside our field who see us only as the scholars' helpers never as the scholars. Such

a view diminishes the librarian from an essential part of the academic faculty to a mere nicety that is in some measure appreciated but always expendable. Whenever I see administrations behaving this way, I cannot but help thinking that we have Dewey to thank for this *reductio ad absurdum*.

My congratulations to Lipscomb on a thought-provoking piece.

Michael A. Flannery
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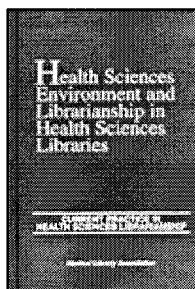
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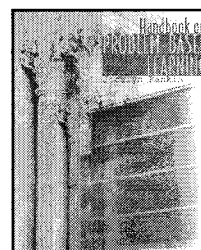
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